

## **“Plain Talk or Plain Language” vs “10-Code”**

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*January 25, 2012*

In 2005 the Federal Government released a strong suggestion that public safety affiliates begin the process of transition from the common practice of using a “10-Code” system to one involving the use of “Plain Talk” during standard radio transmission. This change in communication interaction can be directly traced back to the major incidents which occurred on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and during Hurricane Katrina.

The mass response of thousands of personnel, from hundreds of jurisdictions clearly brought to light a major failure involving interoperability of communication. Following Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released statements strongly discouraging the use of 10-Codes due to their wide variation of meaning. This echoed an earlier recommendation brought forth following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in the SAFECOM program by the Department of Homeland Security.

Ultimately, as a result of a series of over-views which studied the Nation’s ability to respond to major incidents, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) was developed. In 2008, as a result of the process which began with a 2004 Presidential Directive (HSPD-5), the National Incident Management document was finalized. With the completion of this document a series of guidelines were developed which standardized training for emergency response and policy development.

The goal of this final version was to eliminate redundancy while maintaining an emphasis that NIMS is more than simply the Incident Command System (ICS). It is a process of ICS concepts which increase emphasis on planning and guidance for mutual aid during major incidents. It clarified roles for the private sector and non-governmental organizations as well as state and local officials during such incidents.

A major component of the document involved Communications and Information Management at times of implementing the ICS. The cornerstone to enhancing ease of communication between responding sources was the use of common terminology and plain language during times of interoperability between various responding entities. Research had shown that there was a broad range of terminology during communication. This broad range often times caused confusion and a misinterpretation during the interaction of these responders. This in turn enhanced the potential for failure on the part of those individuals who were under direction of the ICS.

In order to meet the requirements of the National Incident Management System, emergency responder agencies began to implement “Plain Language” during voice interaction. However, as of early 2011, 10-Codes remain in common use throughout the country. Justification for the continued use of the 10-Code system is driven by state and local authorities arguing that each code number is linked to a clear and concise meaning within their jurisdiction. Clarity of verbal interaction is maintained as compared to the potential for dialectical terminology conflict when ‘Plain Language’ is used.

In order to address the requests for “Plain Language” as indicated by NIMS and SAFECOM, while maintaining respect for the individual needs of each local and state jurisdiction, the Operations Sub-committee recommends that the Iowa Statewide Interoperable Communication System Board (ISICSB) support the following statement;

- The ISICSB is charged by legislation to, “establish, monitor, and maintain appropriate policies and protocols to ensure that interoperable communications systems function properly...” and thus holds authority over the administrative decisions made by each State and Local emergency responder agency.
- The ISICSB suggests that each State and Local emergency responder agency give full consideration toward the use of “Plain Language” during their daily operations as recommended by the National Incident Management System (NIMS).
- The ISICSB strongly recommends the development of a policy which directs the full transition to “Plain Language” during interactive communication involving the implementation of the Incident Command System (ICS) whenever responders from outside the jurisdiction of need, are involved in a multi-agency incident.

While the ISICSB does not require plain language for internal operations, it strongly encourages it, as it is important to practice everyday terminology and procedures that will need to be used in emergency incidents and disasters. We recognize that this is a long term transition and effort and it is probably not possible to persuade everyone to change ingrained habits overnight. None the less, we do hope that over time, everyone will understand the importance of using common terminology that is, plain language, during their daily routine operation.

ISICSB strongly recommends that each individual agency consider the development of policy migration toward the use of “Plain Language” during agency major incidents. This recommendation helps to ensure that clarity of direction is maintained between all involved parties during periods of high stress activity.